Book club in a Bag

KALAMAZOO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
I Sailed With Magellan

Author: Stuart Dybek

Much of Stuart Dybek's fictional world addresses adolescent life in Chicago's immigrant neighborhoods. Though often considered a member of a long tradition of Chicago writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Saul Bellow, Dybek is known for blurring the lines between the real and the magical, which sets his work apart from the realism of other Chicago writers.

Biographical Information:

Dybek was born on April 10, 1942, in an immigrant neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. His father, Stanley, was a foreman in an International Harvester Plant, and his mother, Adeline, was a truck dispatcher. Dybek developed an interest in music at a young age and has said that jazz music has been an important influence on his development as a writer. He attended a Catholic high school, but soon rejected the strictures of the Catholic church. Upon graduation, Dybek entered Loyola University of Chicago as a pre-med student. He dropped out to devote himself to the peace and civil rights movements, but returned later to receive both his bachelor's (1964) and master's (1968) degrees. Dybek worked as a case worker for the Cook County Department of Public Aid, and a teacher in an elementary school in a Chicago suburb. He also worked in advertising, and then, from 1968 to 1970, he taught at a high school on the island of Saint Thomas. In 1970 Dybek turned his focus to writing; he entered the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Iowa where he received an M.F.A. in 1973. He has taught English at Western Michigan University since 1974. Dybek has won several awards, including an Ernest Hemingway Citation from the P.E.N. American Center for *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980) in 1981; the Whiting Writers Award in 1985; and three O. Henry Memorial Prize Story Awards in 1985, 1986, and 1987.

Major Works:

Dybek's collection *Brass Knuckles* (1979) combines verse and prose poems. The verse poems are clearly set in inner city neighborhoods, whereas the prose poems are not so definitive in their sense of place. Many of the poems focus on childhood, but the images are stark and often violent. "The Rape of Persephone" is the center of the collection, describing the molestation of a child, her subsequent revenge, and her falling in love with Death at the conclusion of the poem. Other poems also rework traditional myths, including "Lazarus" and "Orpheus." Dybek's *Childhood and Other Stories* is a collection of stories about childhood in the Chicago of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. The collection espouses Dybek's assertion that childhood is a visionary state of perception. Ethnicity is very important to the collection, and several stories have themes concerning immigrant life in the city. In "Blood Soup" two boys search the city for a jar of duck blood for an old-country remedy to help cure their grandmother. In other stories Dybek's use of ethnicity is more subtle; his protagonists are often third-generation Polish immigrants and ethnic references are more vague. Some stories in the collection have a surreal quality. "Visions of Budhardin" is about a man who returns to his old neighborhood to make amends for luring his friends into mortal sin when he was a youth. He roams his former neighborhood behind the controls of a mechanical elephant. In the process, he wrecks a church only to escape on a garbage scow with an altar boy. *The Coast of Chicago* (1990) is a combination of one- and two-page vignettes and longer short stories. "Chopin in Winter" deals with the theme of loneliness. The main character, Marcy, is pregnant by an unnamed man and living with her mother. She plays Chopin on her piano, and for a brief moment in time, the music links her to an old man, Dzia-Dzia, and his young grandson who listen to her from a downstairs apartment. To Marcy, the music represents a lament for her lost youth. To Dzia-Dzia, who spent his life moving around, the music reminds him of his life in Poland. To the grandson, who has a crush on Marcy, the music represents the grown-up world which he is on the brink of entering. Metamorphosis is also an important theme in this collection, as represented in

"Hot Ice" The story focuses on an urban legend of a young virgin who drowns while fending off a sexual assault, and who is then entombed in an abandoned ice house by her distraught father. Big Antek, a former butcher, claims to have seen the virgin and her coffin of ice. He claims that while locked in the ice house one night, her presence warmed him and helped him avoid freezing. The three main characters are changed through their connection to the legend. The virgin herself, or at least her story, is metamorphosized when the protagonists free her from her icy coffin.

Critical Reception:

Critics classify Dybek as a "Chicago writer" and compare his work to that of Nelson Algren and James T. Farrell, among others. Bruce Cook calls Dybek "a true inheritor, one who stands tall in a direct line of succession with Chicago's best." Reviewers often note the black humor present in Dybek's work. They also comment that there is a blurring of fantasy and reality in Dybek's fictional world, and that there is a "transcendental, magical quality" to many of his stories, in the words of Cook. Certain reviewers have asserted that Dybek occasionally loses control of his fantastical elements and that his stories are weakened in the process. David Kubal complains that Dybek suffers from "the modern writer's urge to mythologize reality..." Some reviewers discuss the difficulty of avoiding sentimentalism when writing about childhood and immigrant neighborhoods, but critics assert that Dybek avoids this fault. David Clewell states that "whether writing about adolescent sex, hoodlums, shopkeepers, or his beautifully-drawn ragmen, Dybek neatly skirts the obvious pitfalls of sentimentality." Despite his shortcomings, critics have found Dybek to be a strong and imaginative writer.

Writings By The Author:

Brass Knuckles (poetry) 1979
Childhood and Other Neighborhoods (short stories) 1980
Orchids (play) 1990
The Coast of Chicago (short stories) 1990; also published with six selections from *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, 1991

Further Readings:

Coates, Joseph. "A Storied Renaissance." *The Chicago Tribune* (8 April 1990): 1, 4. Coates asserts that Dybek's *The Coast of Chicago* is further proof of the renaissance of the short story. [Reprinted in CLC, Volume 114.]

Kubal, David. A review of *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, by Stuart Dybek. *The Hudson Review* XXXIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1980): 445-47. Kubal states that Dybek's *Childhood and Other Stories* contains "stories of vigorous and brilliant unconventionality." [Reprinted in CLC, Volume 114.]

Montrose, David. "Into the Underworlds." *Times Literary Supplement* (26 July 1991): 19. Montrose discusses the problems of combining two volumes of Dybek's stories into the British version of *The Coast of Chicago*. [Reprinted in CLC, Volume 114.]

Source Citation:"Stuart Dybek."Contemporary Literary Criticism Select.

Spotlight on:
I Sailed With Magellan

Review: Alice Catherine Carls

TWENTY-THREE YEARS AFTER the publication of *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), thirteen years after *The Coast of Chicago* (1990), the eagerly awaited release of *I Sailed with Magellan* capped a trilogy and earned Stuart Dybek a "One Book, One Chicago" recognition from the Chicago Public Library and Chicago mayor's office for the spring of 2004. Weaving the tangible into the mythic, framing his narrative universe between spiritual highs and grotesque lows, Dybek joins James Joyce, Nelson Algren, Charles Wright, Eugenio Montale, and Saul Bellow in using finite space and time as anchors for a poetic, multilayered initiation. The travels to and from the unbounded space-time of there/then and the bounded space-time of here/now transform the 1950s and 1960s multiethnic neighborhood of Chicago's Southside into ou-topos and meta-time. Bordered by the Western Avenue bridge, the sanitary canal, the "El," and the Expressway, altogether boundary and opening, the neighborhood streets become the stage upon which actions are framed into images and images into plot. A similar demarche can be seen in Dybek's recent volume of poems, *Streets in Their Own Ink* (2004).

Dybek is known for having redefined the short short and the long short story, a technique that he describes not without humor as UWOS, or Unidentified Writing Objects. *I Sailed with Magellan's* postmodern vision is fragmented yet structured, not unlike the pieces of broken glass that litter the streets of Southside. The long short story "Breasts" illustrates this technique by gradually revealing the narrative voices' tight web. The stories' existential core emerges much like the freshly painted kitchen cupboards in "Lunch at Loyola Arms" that reveal, one by one, the marks made by their previous owners. From behind the smoothness of the white paint/white page, there emerges, in layered evidence, the archaeology of our lives. Complementing the stories' structure is a style well served by Dybek's watchful eye and his ability to translate details into a rich, dense prose. His descriptions of birds, perfumes, skin, fire hydrants, food, the color blue, cars and car parts, sex, music—the many smells and sites of Southside, its streets, bars, and seedy rented rooms—are a feast for the senses or, without warning, torture, as in "Breasts" where a knifing death is described in all its hyperrealistic horror.

The themes of otherness and belonging are issues that, as a Polish American author, Dybek cannot fully escape. Dybek's main character and narrator, Perry Katzek, goes through three discrete initiatic quests for identity, wanderlust, and meaning. The search for roots appears almost peripheral to Perry, whose grandfather emigrated from Poland. Magellan's name is barely mentioned in a few stories. And the poignancy of adult drifters, losers, odd characters, and other outcasts is softened by young Perry's perception. These quests are dimmed by the din of a crude and colorful reality and by the boundless energy of Perry's actions. The world is rigged, illusions are broken, Mozart is assassinated daily, and reality ends up on its head. Like Magellan, Dybek's characters sail around their lives without being able to quite make it back. Nevertheless, their enduring innocence, their moral compass, and their instinctive generosity force the reader to grant them space and place. They, whose escape proves illusory and whose hopes are all but lost, redirect nostalgia into energy. The jeweled beads of a fire hydrant's spray on a summer afternoon; the deep, peaceful layers of water off a forbidden beach; a babushka's delirious care for her bed-ridden grandson—all are small epiphanies that transform Dybek's "Great Moments collection," to paraphrase Perry, into magical, mythical prisms of silence.

Alice-Catherine Carls
University of Tennessee at Martin

Spotlight on:
I Sailed With Magellan

Review: The New York Times Book Review

There are writers who could be said to "own" —by virtue of their intimate, energetic characterization—certain cities. A few such towns and their laureates that come quickly to mind are James M. Cain's Los Angeles, Tennessee Williams's New Orleans, Joyce's Dublin and, surely, James T. Farrell's Chicago. Over several decades, in novels and stories, Farrell anatomized the customs and rites of Irish Catholics on Chicago's South Side and anthropomorphized that locale, investing it with a psychological depth as nuanced as that of any of his characters; he gave his city a memorable voice. Stuart Dybek's first two collections of short stories— "The Coast of Chicago" and "Childhood and Other Neighborhoods" —mined the South Side for the same ethnic ore, only instead of the Irish it is the inheritors of that real estate, the Poles, Italians and Mexicans, who are his subjects.

"*I Sailed With Magellan*" furthers this urban studies project. It's another story collection, yet one that's presented as "a novel-in-stories,'' apparently because there's only one narrator, Perry Katzek, and his tales unfold in the manner of a traditional bildungsroman. Like those of Studs Lonigan or Danny O'Neill, the central characters in many of Farrell's stories (a selection titled "Chicago Stories" was published in 1998), Perry's childhood, adolescence and young manhood are charted against the backdrop of a rough-and-tumble neighborhood of bars, bad guys, parochial schools, churches and factories. In "Song", the opening story, Dybek stakes out his turf. Perry recalls how as a child he was brought around by his Uncle Lefty from taprooms to V.F.W. halls to sing for root beer and stronger stuff for Uncle. "There were more taverns in the neighborhood," Perry notes, "than we could visit in a single afternoon." They are the kind of downbeat haunts where hard luck World War II and Korea veterans knock back boilermakers.

Perry's a sensitive kid—we learn that he likes to write, collects butterflies and plays the clarinet, activities he tends to hide from others. Of course, as a child and even more so as a teenager, he sees much more than those around him. (In books and movies that's the job description for sensitive kids in tough neighborhoods.) He and his younger brother, Mick, lie awake in "Live From Dreamsville" listening to their parents arguing and then, just before sleep sets in, to a man in the next building beating his dog. When the dog's whining stops, Perry recalls how he "could feel my lungs heaving and realized I'd been holding my breath." It's an airless vision of the city as rat warren: small apartments in too-close buildings separated by streets where everyone knows your business. In their beds, the boys retreat into nonsense singing, with a refrain that promises escape to exotic locales: "I sailed with Magellan, oh, oh, oh...boiled our shoes...ate our sails."

Perry's vivid sense of his neighbors' inner lives is given its fullest exercise in the longish story *Blue Boy*. The blue boy is Ralphie Poskozim, a blue baby who somehow survived his first several years, and Dybek artfully hints at his impending doom: "The blue was plainly visible beneath his blue-green eyes, smudges darker than shadows, as if he'd been in a fistfight or gotten into his mother's mascara. Even in summer his lips looked cold." As a kid just a few years older than Ralphie, Perry broods on the blue boy's relationship with his brother, who is Perry's age. He contrasts their "open affection" with his own more contentious regard for Mick, their bond being one that "turned life comic at the expense of anything gentle."

But Dybek himself doesn't seem quite aware of the blue boy's significance, or at least of how to frame it. The story casually ambles from one digression to another. The tale about Ralphie leads to Perry's conversation with a girl in his class about a story he wrote for Sister Lucy, which predicates (with a detour for an account of Peanuts Bizzaro's murder) a description of Perry's plan to write a story about a story his father told him, which leads to a story about shopping for a Christmas tree with his father. We then veer back to a story the girl writes about Ralphie, and the whole shebang somehow fast-forwards to Mick's appearance at his father's funeral many years later.

Spotlight on:
I Sailed With Magellan

In this and a few other selections, the narrative sequence tags along behind memory's associative logic and as such feels unshaped, slack and not a little wearying. Aside from a taxing a reader's patience, this shaggy-dog style is thrown into unflattering contrast by Dybek's colloquial yet precisely built sentences: "It took a conscious effort to inhale its sharpness, yet instead of cursing the cold, I had a thought that maybe the purpose of winter was to make you realize with every breath that you were alive and wanted to stay that way."

It's not all grim urban struggle: Dybek can strike lighter notes too. "We Didn't" is a nostalgic, funny teenage sex-and-guilt tale. "We'd been kissing all day—all summer—kisses tasting of different shades of lip gloss and too many Cokes" is how Perry recalls the summer he almost lost his virginity. In a scene that reminds him of "From Here to Eternity," he and his girlfriend are locked together on the beach, just seconds shy of completing the act, when a horde of cops and squad cars descends on them. A young woman's body has washed into the shallow water not far away. The event and its implications—the woman was pregnant and the girlfriend is convinced it was a love child—hover over the summer romance, poisoning any further attempts at consummation. The dead body constitutes the ultimate cautionary tale; no priest or nun could have cooked up a better warning about the price of pleasure. In its wake Perry is left feeling like "the D. H. Lawrence of not doing it, the voice of all the would-be lovers who ached and squirmed."

With *I Sailed With Magellan* Dybek solidifies his reputation as the rightful heir to Farrell's gritty realism; his stories remind us that despite Americans' ambivalence over urban life, exemplified by the flight to suburbs and the Sun Belt, the old brick-and-asphalt city remains a productive crucible of human drama, the place where an open fire hydrant or a sudden thunderstorm can seem as if it might "drown the innocent and guilty alike."

By Albert Mobilio

Source Citation:†"Urban Studies."†The New York Times Book Review.†108.(Nov. 30, 2003):†Book Review Desk:†p7.

Spotlight on:
I Sailed With Magellan

Interview With Donna Seaman:

Stuart Dybek is a poet and a short story writer whose work is inspired and shaped by his memories of growing up in Chicago, and by his love for music. Over the course of writing his five books—each exquisitely crafted, indelibly lyrical, arrestingly urban and down-to-earth, devilishly funny, and ravishingly erotic—Dybek has conjured a mythic city of brick and asphalt, desire and dreams. Dybek's Chicago is a checkerboard of ethnically defined neighborhoods in which human life in all its striving, absurdity, and beauty dominates, while nature, in all its determined wildness and glory, persists in the city's weedy seams and in the vastness of Lake Michigan.

Dybek's stereoscopic vision of the city's steely reality and penchant for risk-all romance underlies his two poetry collections, *Brass Knuckles* (1979) and *Streets in Their Own Ink* (2004), and his three works of fiction, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), *The Coast of Chicago* (1990), and *I Sailed with Magellan* (2003). Dybek's linked stories and poetry are as essential to understanding life in Chicago as works by Theodore Dreiser, Nelson Algren, James Farrell, Gwendolyn Brooks, Saul Bellow, and Leon Forrest, and yet Dybek transcends his earthy precincts, spiriting readers away to more mysterious, archetypal, and profound realms. Not only does Dybek masterfully evoke the intricate, singing web of urban life, he also elucidates the complex symbiotic relationship between people and place in painterly descriptions of city streets, morning glory-wreathed chain-linked fences, the chimerical great lake, and the white-cap-raising and trash-spinning wind, thus elucidating our ability to discern and be transformed by beauty, however unlikely its manifestations and harsh its settings.

Dybek's work has appeared in such distinguished venues as *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Poetry*, the *Paris Review*, and *Tri-Quarterly*, and he has been the recipient of many awards including a Whiting Writers' Award, a Pushcart Prize, several O. Henry Prizes, and a PEN/Bernard Malamud Prize. A professor of English at Western Michigan University, Dybek was in his hometown in late May 2004 when we spoke, making one of many appearances associated with the selection of *The Coast of Chicago* for *One Book*, *One Chicago*, a citywide reading and discussion program sponsored by the Chicago Public Library.

DONNA SEAMAN: Your stories are so poetic. The imagery and metaphors are so rich, and so fully integrated into character and story, I'm curious as to what form you started writing first, poetry or fiction.
STUART DYBEK: They were always simultaneous, and continue to be written in tandem, so to speak. I kind of "collect" in poetry. Writers often keep little journals, and I call mine "A Great Thoughts Notebook," with tongue firmly planted in cheek. In there a lot of stuff gets recorded in a sloppy verse line, and imagery is emphasized. Then I loot that stuff for both stories and poems.

DS: In talking about the early stages of writing when you aren't sure what form a piece is going to take, you've referred pieces-in-progress as "unidentified written objects."
SD: Yes. It very seldom happens that a piece starts out as fiction and ends up as a poem, but it has happened to me frequently that a piece starts out as a poem and ends up as a story. Ray Carver wrote both fiction and poetry. People, most of whom much preferred his fiction, used to say that he didn't think he could write fiction if he didn't write poetry, no matter what anyone else thought about his poems, which, I hasten to add, I do like.

DS: There's an intriguing tension in your stories between what we call reality, or observable life, and other dimensions of being. And I think you bridge the divide between the tangible world and the unconscious, or the hidden world, with images. *I Sailed with Magellan*, for instance, is brimming with images of water, birds, and flowers. Is this is a conscious artistic choice? A deliberate strategy?

Interview continued:

SD: I don't think it started out consciously. And to this day, I remain a big believer in taking advantage of accidents—which are often an indication of what your un-reflected-upon-instincts are—but without drawing it out too much. What happened, for instance, in my first book of stories was that I had written a bunch of stories and they didn't seem to have much coherence. I really hadn't even thought of them as a book. Then a local library asked me to do a talk, and they asked me to give them a title for the talk. And while I was happy to do the talk, I hated the notion of giving it a title. I always have a hard time coming up with something snappy. So I worried about that excessively, and somewhere along the line I came up with *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*.

Initially I was just proud of myself for having succeeded in coming up with a title for my talk, but later on I became kind of fond of it. Then I realized that it could be a title for a collection of stories. So that was kind of an accident. The second accident that I wanted to talk about in relationship to your question was how, once I had this title, it made me realized that out of the stories I had, I could sort out neighborhood stories, which also meant Chicago stories, because I had several stories I had written that didn't have a darn thing to do with Chicago. So all these many years later people kindly rank me in the Chicago Tradition, but it was only an accident that I decided to gather Chicago stories around this title.

The other problem I had at that time was that a bunch of my stories were what you might call realistic and several were unrealistic, and I had never thought about putting them together. But when I looked at what I had, now that I was going to do Chicago stories for the first book, I realized that I had almost equal amounts of each, and that by just completing the design and writing a couple more "unrealistic stories" I could have a sequence: an unrealistic, a realistic, an unrealistic, a realistic. So there never was an overarching strategy, a conscious decision. Instead there was this feeling that you're way into what might cohere as a book. But once that I did that, it made me aware of the whole notion of counterpoint in writing. I was very aware of how important counterpoint is in music, but it never really occurred to me before that it was a tremendously important mechanism that writers of all kinds use in order to create compression and resonance. That when you take two things that are unlike and you put them side by side, a current jumps between them, as in positive and negative, and that this current is often what the reader supplies where there is silence. So the reader is participating in bringing these two things together, and what's happening is that stuff is getting said that you haven't had to write in language. You're able to say it by just the arrangement of two images, or two stories, or two whatever.

So I became very conscious of the notion of counterpoint, so much so that when I was working on my next book I was looking for another kind of counterpoint. This time I had written all of these short-shorts, these prose-poem-like stories. So the counterpoint in *The Coast of Chicago* became the counterpoint between the little vignettes and the longer stories.

DS: Music is a key element in your work. Not only is your writing musical, but music also plays a part in your characters' lives, and music is part of the cityscape in which they move.

SD: Yes, it's become a real subject for me, and an unavoidable one because of the role music plays in my own life. In my personal life aside from writing, music has an almost religious aspect to it. So it sneaks in and bleeds into the writing the way a person's religion might. Music is transformational, transcendent. A lot of what we ascribe to religious experience any number of people find in music, and so as subject matter in a story it often signals that there will be some transcendent moment, or at least a reach for a transcendent moment.

Spotlight on:
I Sailed With Magellan

Interview continued:

DS: A profound sense of place is also key to your work. You grew up in Chicago, and you're considered a Chicago writer, part, as you say, of the Chicago Tradition, which includes Theodore Dreiser, Nelson Algren, James Farrell, and Saul Bellow, a literature known for its gritty realism and focus on the underdog. Yet if you look closely at Chicago literature, you do find poetic prose, highly imaginative interpretations, and surrealist, or magical, or otherworldly passages. You detect the writer's awareness of the fact that this pragmatic city is actually a land of fantasies and dreams. I wonder if you perceive of this aspect of Chicago literature, and if you feel that Chicago-based literature has changed over the years.

SD: My perception of it now is certainly different than what my perception was when I was a younger guy at any earlier point in my own writing, when I was still in a kind of apprenticeship. My perception then was that the Chicago Tradition was, in fact, a realistic tradition. I could see where Algren tried to make departures, and certainly Bellow was capable of tremendous lyrical flights. I mean, he's a spectacular stylist and he can write any way he wants. But the tradition itself seemed to be pretty much linked to social realism and that was something I admired it for. I never ever sat down and thought of myself as a "Chicago writer" by the way. I was just trying to write stories. But the stories I wrote initially were imitative in that they were realistic stories, and I found it very hard to have what seemed to me to be an individual voice writing in that totally realistic mode. I had a nagging feeling about this lack of distinctive voice, but I didn't know how to get it. Finally, what happened was yet another accident. I ended up writing a story I hadn't sat down to write, and it had to do with music.

I've told this antidote before, so I feel a little sheepish about repeating it, but I always write to music, and I always have. It's a way of heightening concentration and "getting in the mood." When I first started doing it I listened mostly to jazz, which was the first music that I really truly fell in love with. But by this point in my early twenties I was writing to anything that interested me, and what was interesting to me at the moment was Eastern European composers, Bartok and Kodaly in particular. I absolutely love cello. So I was listening to their cello stuff, and I had taken on a loan from the library a very beat-up LP record of Janos Starker playing Zoltan Kodaly's "*Suite for Unaccompanied Cello*," which still amazes me to this day. And under the spell of that music, I wrote a kind of unrealistic Chicago story. At that point the only writer I knew who even nodded in that direction was Bernard Malamud. So that was a little personal breakthrough for me.

At this point, speaking now in the present, sure, I don't think that Chicago writing can any longer, or in any sense, be strictly identified as coming from social realism. There are just so many independent voices of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, and a lot of them bring the folkways of the culture that their parents or grandparents lived in into their work, and all of that has enriched the palette.

DS: I agree, and yet so much of Chicago literature is rooted in the city itself. The neighborhood is a theme of Chicago life that most contemporary writers continue to be inspired by, from John McNally and Joe Meno writing about the far South Side to Sandra Cisneros writing about Mango Street, Ana Castillo writing fiction about neighborhood gentrification, and Joseph Epstein and Adam Langer writing about Rogers Park. The neighborhood is a crucible of the self, even as young protagonists dream about discovering the wider world, which is often associated with Lake Michigan. You write about the lake and other aspects of nature so evocatively, which reminds me of a line in a story titled "Blight" in *The Coast of Chicago*, a line that I think can serve both as your credo as a writer and as a key to your questing characters. Deejo, the guy with the car, tells his friends, "I dig beauty." This turns into a big joke, but it truly is a reason for living, and your characters often find and treasure beauty in the most unbeautiful of circumstances.

SD: I think that's really accurate. I still feel that, even though we live in this postmodern world, art in general, certainly literature in particular, can be beautiful without being ornamental. So as a writer it's often a goal to try and risk writing something beautiful.

Interview continued:

In the stories themselves, imagination often becomes a survival skill for characters in a world of sometimes severe limitations due to class. One of the reasons that Chicago neighborhoods are interesting is that they are paradoxical. There is an enormous amount of richness in this little unit called neighborhood, but at the same time there are dangerous limitations inherent in it as well. So how does one enjoy the richness and make that part of life without also suffering the limitations. For many of the characters, and as you said, a lot of them are young, imagination helps them survive, and it's imagination that also leads them to a perception of beauty.

DS: And this perception of beauty provides an unexpected portal into other realms.
SD: That's right.

DS: In *I Sailed with Magellan*, Perry, the main character, loves what he calls the "unsanitary canal." It's actually a harshly industrial spot, but because he's an imaginative guy, he transforms what's in front of him into a place of strange and haunting beauty. Of course this vision is difficult to share, which makes him feel like quite the misfit.
SD: Yes. I think that's true. In the earlier story you mentioned, "Blight," one of the things that happens is that the neighborhood has been made an official blight area, but in all different ways the story tries to demonstrate the notion of beauty as being in the eye of the beholder. Well, I suppose I've just reduced my story to a cliche, but what the heck. I wrote it, I guess I can destroy it, too. So to continue, one element of that is the ecstatic. These kids are always looking for the ecstatic moment. And, in fact, when Bijou utters that line, "I dig beauty," a remark that he then gets maligned for for the rest of his days, he utters it in a total ecstatic moment, when he's just carried away. Then there's a story in *I Sailed with Magellan* called "Orchids" in which one of the ways the guys make fun of each other is to keep telling each other, "You're getting carried away," or "Don't get carried away." But, of course, what they want to be is carried away.

DS: I'm interested in the evolution in your fiction, from *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* to *The Coast of Chicago* to *I Sailed with Magellan*.
SD: In the first book, *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, the kind of stories that were providing the nonrealistic side of what I talked about earlier as counterpoint, are, to my mind, essentially grotesque. Grotesque is frequently identified by the merging of humanity with something else, often the beast. And there's actually a story in there called *Visions of Budhardin*, in which a guy is merged with a papier-mache elephant. So while I also wanted to imply counterpoint in the next book, I didn't want to repeat the grotesque-realistic counterpoint. And what was kind of interesting to me at that time goes back to your earlier question about poetry. I kept asking myself what the difference is between verse and poetry. And one of the things that occurred to me is that when people ask me about "poetic fiction," a lot of the time what they are really talking about is the fact that something might happen in a story that would earn for you, or trigger for you, a lyrical moment. And in order to express that lyrical, or even ecstatic, moment, you change modes. You go from the realistic mode to the lyrical mode. Without going too much farther on that, I will just quickly say that in our society we mainly associate poetry with a lyrical mode. That is, it is associative, it isn't cause-and-effect the way a story is. If you put a story in a chronological line and you say first this happened and then this happened, there is an implicitness in that, a cause and effect. Whereas if you go from the image of rain to the image of a lake, because of the association of water, you're thinking in an associative way, as you do in dreams. And lyrical time is different from narrative time.

So as soon as I began thinking along those lines and realized there were different modes a writer could write in—even though I hadn't articulated this quite clearly to myself—I realized that I wanted the counterpoint to the

Interview continued:

realism in *The Coast of Chicago* not to be grotesque but to be lyrical. And so what happens in that book is that there is all kinds of different versions of lyricism. "Chopin in Winter" has one kind of lyricism, and some of little interconnected vignettes, like "Lights" have a prose poem-like lyricism, and "Pet Milk" has got a very romantic lyricism. One of the things you do in a lyrical mode, or one way you can use a lyrical mode, is to eroticize the city. And that book has various versions in which the city itself is eroticized, whether it's a kiss going across the city in "Nighthawks" or on the El train in "Pet Milk." The city is constantly being eroticized there.

The basic reflex was similar in *I Sailed with Magellan*. I wanted to continue to explore writing about this city, and I wanted to continue to explore writing about this neighborhood, but I didn't want to continue repeating these kinds of formulas. I don't want to repeat the lyrical-realistic counterpoint anymore than I wanted to repeat the grotesque-realistic contrast. So I was looking for sameness and yet difference. I also wanted to try to write a book that was more unified in conventional ways because, for me, there were underlying unities in those first two books. I mean, unities were present in the kinds of choices I made with the first two books as to what to include and what to exclude. And once I had decided what to include, what I then needed to write in order to complete it felt, on a gut level, like some kind of design. Now, I didn't necessarily expect that the reader would tease that out, but I did hope that the reader would feel that there was a coherence.

In *Magellan*, I really wanted the reader to be a little bit more aware of what the coherences were. So how could you not be aware of the fact that a character named Perry Katzek appears in every story, or that each story has within it a song? So there were what I would call conventional unities in it, unities that approach a form that is sometimes called a novel-in-stories. Some critics debate exactly what a novel-in-stories is, but I have no huge desire to join in that debate. And I really did still want some interplay between the real and the non-real. So the last story I wrote for the book was "Breasts" because I really wanted to add that one underlying counterpoint moment.

DS: Your writing is full of music, but it's also gorgeously visual, and I picture each of the books you've just discussed as works of art, with the first being a collage in which you've juxtaposed many images and styles. *The Coast of Chicago* is more patterned, fit and jointed together like an inlaid floor rather than pasted together. And *I Sailed with Magellan* is a radiant tapestry, each tale woven seamlessly into a greater whole.

SD: One thing that I mention to students when I teach, and which I've always enjoyed saying for the sake of pure mystification, is that I find literature to be a really odd art form. And that I live in a state of total envy toward all the other arts. I would give anything to paint or to play a musical instrument. It's the lack of the sensual. All the other arts come right through the senses. We see a painting with our eyes, but how do we read? Where does that all take place? It doesn't take place on a piece of paper or a computer screen. The medium, language, is the most abstract of all the mediums. And that mystery extends to the point at which if I read a story by Dickens or Eudora Welty I say, Eudora Welty told me this story or Dickens told me this story, but who tells the writer? In other words, even though I could tell you that "Breasts" includes a few factual incidents, the story itself is not a recounting of those factual incidents. It's just so mysterious how stories piece themselves together.

I was in a hotel room in New York City just after 9/11. I had gone to New York to do a benefit. There were benefits all over the place at that point, and it was just a few days after and the city reeked of death. The ruins were still smoldering and smoking, and I don't know, maybe it was under the spell of all that violence, but suddenly, just totally unbidden, the scene in "Breasts" in which Joey Ditto kills Johnny Sovereign just came out of nowhere into my mind. I wrote feverishly on hotel stationery. The same thing happened with the wrestler in that story. I was sitting on a curb with a great photographer, Paul D'Amato.

Interview continued:

DS: One of his photographs is on the cover of *I Sailed with Magellan*.
SD: Yes, he did the cover. I think he's brilliant, a genius. So Paul and I had gone down to a summer fair in Pilsen, where I grew up. Paul had spent seven years taking pictures of that neighborhood. We were hanging out together. It's always fun to hang out with Paul. I just loved watching him take photos. I was sitting on the curb eating a taco, and Paul was right up on the action. They had erected a wrestling ring on 19th Street right under the El by St. Ann's church and I was watching these two guys with masks wrestle. And I was watching Paul photograph them, and suddenly one of the guys got tossed out of the ring right on top of Paul. For a moment I was afraid he broke Paul's neck, then the next moment I was thinking, "Well, Paul still has his neck intact, how's his camera?" But Paul is a tough guy. He picked himself up and laughed and dusted himself off. At that moment I suddenly knew that there had to be a wrestler in the story "Breasts" which didn't even have a title and wasn't even written. I'm talking about process now, not writing, and I'm always a little suspicious when the conversation turns to process because it's so very different than actually creating a thing. It always take place in Dreamsville. You can talk about process, and then the actual thing never gets written, so what good is it?

DS: But it's essential. Lots of people have the chops. Lots of people can make sentences, but they don't have the stories to tell. They don't have the images.
SD: It was just so oddly mysterious. I guess I'm back talking about accidents. Why would that come into your mind and why would you know it was for a story that you hadn't even written yet?

DS: I think you're talking about the artist's profound receptiveness to the world, their openness. I think of it as an aesthetic readiness. To go back to the abstraction of writing, I understand what you're saying about writing's lack of sensuousness, but writing is a physical practice. You are making things out of words. You do use your hands and your eyes to build words out of letters, sentences out of words, pages out of sentences. To my mind, writing encompasses every creative act. It does all that painting can do and all that music can do, and more. Language is the universal medium. Almost all of us have language, almost everyone can get hold of a book, or an audio-book, a pencil and a piece of paper. You can read and write anywhere with the minimum of equipment. And literature's reach is infinite, its subjects and points of view limitless.
SD: Well, one of the things I've tried to do to emulate the other art forms, which I'm admitting to envying, is that I've tried to become very aware of the craft of writing. Because what I really want is a stained up old box of oil paints, and things like color wheels. When I first got interested in all this, one of my best friends was a painter. He was going to the Art Institute of Chicago, and I envied the way he bought himself a pair of real soft suede pants to impress girls. But that wasn't enough. He then had to take these pants that he had just paid some obscenely expensive price for, money he couldn't afford, and he had to spatter them with his paints so that he looked like an artist. What am I going to do, walk around with a piece of paper?

DS: Ink stains.
SD: They'll just think you're an accountant or something.

DS: You're explaining something that mystified me in the story titled "Nighthawks," in which the library becomes some sort of miserable hell and the art museum is heaven.
SD: There it is. That's it. So one of the things I've done is try to pretend that all these things like metaphors and scenic construction and counterpoint and blah, blah, blah are like easels and canvases and canvas stretchers and gesso. Because I do perceive abstraction in language and concreteness and sensuality in all the other art forms, I've been attracted to writers who swim upstream against abstraction. That is, writers who set out to make an abstract medium as essential as they can. And sometimes they do it and play both sides of the fence, and those

Interview continued:

are often my favorite writers. The writer who comes immediately to mind would be somebody like Eugenio Montale, the Italian poet, and Yeats, another poet. Writers like that really intrigue me. In the great Yeats poem, "Sailing to Byzantium," he talks about "hammered gold and gold enameling." By the time you finish that poem it feels like a poem written not of words but of gold. So as an unreachable goal for me—the attempt to turn a story into music, which of course you can never do, or to turn it into a sensually visual object, which of course you can never do, leads to the emphasis of imagery and rhythms and so forth. Not that those things aren't already a part of writing. Of course they are, but by energizing them and keeping your mind on them, one draws on one's love and emulation of other art forms. And I think it's really important. A lot of times writers are asked, Who are your influences? Who are you reading? The question needs to be expanded to, Who are you looking at? Who are you listening to? Whose performances are you going to see?

Seaman, Donna. "A conversation with Stuart Dybek." TriQuarterly. 123 (Winter 2006): p15.

Interview continued: